



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

What Do We Do Now?
Psalm 84; Luke 2:22-40

We know the passage from Luke 2—at least the first twenty verses. It is the Christmas story, the version of Jesus' birth that is pretty much imprinted on our souls. It is such an important part of our Christmas celebration that many of us practically know it by heart.

We are not as familiar with the second half of the second chapter of Luke's gospel. At most, we hear it once a year, a week or so after Christmas. It doesn't stick with us like the earlier story. There are no shepherds abiding or angels singing. We do find Mary and Joseph and the baby—this time in the temple. Listen to the story:

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.

Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed

so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him. Luke 2:22-40

Although they are an important part of the Christmas story and appear long before the magi, Simeon and Anna never made it into the manger scene. We tend to think of Simeon as an old man waiting for God to “take him home,” and of Anna as an elderly prophet who lived in the temple and prayed all of the time. Their significance lies in the fact that they were waiting for the Messiah and, while going about their daily routines, they immediately recognized Jesus when they saw him. They offered praise and blessing. Mary and Joseph were doing what every Jewish family did after having a baby boy. A month or so after his birth, they went to the temple to offer sacrifice and complete the time of purification. Then they went home.

Matthew tells us about the magi and the dreams and the flight to Egypt to avoid the murderous insecurity of Herod. Luke tells us that they finished their business in Jerusalem and went home.

Psalm 48, which we heard earlier, talks about home. It speaks of the temple as God’s home when it sings, “How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!” It describes how good it is to be in that sacred, comfortable place, at home with God.

We know how good home feels. During Christmas, homes are rich with family, friends, food, and decorations—and we enjoy it. But we also like to get the tree out, pack up the angels and Santas and elves, and get our homes back in order. We like being at home with everything as it should be. No doubt Mary and Joseph were happy to arrive back home in Nazareth, all ritual obligations completed, and to simply be at home as a family.

Now what? What do you do after Jesus has arrived and all of the celebrations are over? What do you do when you go back home, not empty handed, but with the Messiah? What do we people of faith do now that Jesus has come?

A Chasidic story tells that a rabbi once looked up at the heavens and said: “Angel, little angel! It’s no great trick to be an angel up there in the sky! You don’t have to eat and drink, beget children and earn money. Just come down to earth and worry about eating and drinking, about raising children and earning money, and we shall see if you keep on being an angel.”¹

I think the rabbi has a good point. It ought to be fairly easy to be an angel in heaven, but from experience we can all attest to the fact that being a faithful human day by day here on earth can be a real challenge. What do we do now that Jesus is here?

When Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the temple and encountered Simeon and Anna, praise and thanksgiving were abundant. Symbolic of all the Hebrew people, both of these souls had been waiting for years for God to fulfill his promise. Somehow Simeon was assured that he would see the Messiah before he died so he came to the temple every day. We have no idea how long he had been coming, but clearly there was the anticipation that each day might be THE day. Anna had taken up residence in the temple, praying night and day for the redemption of Israel. On that day, she was just as eager to discover the Messiah as she had been years before.

I came across a prayer the other day that made me think about the power prayer has to change us: “Holy One, Maker and Shaper, help me to live this day as if it were the first day of creation, and everything newly glistening to my eyes.”²

We all know the phrase, “Today is the first day of the rest of your life.” It offers us a good perspective on the importance of looking forward and making the most of life. This prayer, however, is different. What if we lived as if each day were the first day of creation? What if we acted as if not only our life was still to be lived, but the life of the entire world waited before us? What if we treated everyone and everything we encountered as shiny and new instead of as used and worn out? If we opened our door in the morning

¹Chaim Stern, *Day by Day: Reflections on the Themes of the Torah from Literature, Philosophy, and Religious Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 206.

²Stern, 201.

to a fresh and exciting world, we would be filled with openness and wonder. In their advanced age, Simeon and Anna saw the world as new because the Messiah had come. As Paul wrote, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (II Corinthians 5:17).

The coming of Christ into our lives means that life is just beginning for us and for the world. Everything is new and precious; therefore, we need to treat it that way. How do you treat a new car? You park it in the furthest reaches of the parking lot, to avoid scratches and dings. You wash it, you clean it. You protect it. You look at all of the gauges and dials, buttons and switches with awe and excitement. When was the last time we looked at the world that way? It is rainy and cold today so most of us will stay in this afternoon. I encourage you to find a spot where you can stand or sit by a window for a while. Watch the rain. Notice what it does. Look at the way it causes leaves to bounce and how each drop creates a unique splash. If you can find a drop to observe, look at the way light illumines and reflects that drop of water. Every day the world is being created anew. Pay attention. Notice. And then resolve to take care of our home and everyone and everything that lives in it. Treat every day as the beginning of life itself.

Now that Jesus has come, we also ought to be careful about how we treat one another. Someone prayed:

O God, grant that each one who has to do with me today is the happier for it. Each hour of this day grant me the wisdom of a loving heart that I may say the right thing rightly.

Give me a quick perception of the feelings and needs of others, and make me eager-hearted in helping them. Then shall my day be filled with blessing.³

At the end of the day, can we say that everyone who has had to do with us is happier for it? I don't think I can say that every day. In fact, I know that yesterday I had an encounter with someone who left feeling worse than when he approached me. I certainly did.

I had left a store and returned to my car when someone knocked on the window. I cracked it a bit and the man standing there said, “Excuse me, sir, I apologize for bothering you. Could you possibly give me a little money to get something to eat?” I had just left the MLK Oratorical contest and was wearing

³Anonymous prayer as quoted in Stern, 200.

a suit. Anyone wearing a suit on a Saturday morning is probably a good hit for a handout. I have had enough of these encounters to know what was going on but I felt like I ought to do something. I told him that I don't usually give handouts (which I don't) and he agreed and told me that he was homeless. As I passed a few bills through the crack in the window, I said, "You know you can go to the shelter for a hot meal." Then I said with clear irritation in my voice, "No alcohol or tobacco!" He assured me he would not spend it that way and thanked me. I closed my window and left, feeling angry and frustrated, not at the man, but at myself.

I don't for a moment believe that man is homeless, though I have no doubt he has to work at finding food to eat. I do think that he saw a well-dressed man on a Saturday morning and figured I was an easy mark. All that aside, my response to him was gruff and begrudging. I don't think it is a good idea to offer handouts, but in doing so I could have said, "Take this and go over to the store and get you something good to eat, something that you really like and which will make your day better. Take this and enjoy." Had I done that, he would have known that I understood his scam, but he might have walked away thinking that his day could be better. He might have walked away sensing that somebody else thought he was a little bit better than he thought of himself. He might have thought that instead of a handout, someone was offering him a hand-up. I failed. I hope he did not. Today I want to make sure that anyone who has to do with me is happier for it. Simeon is a good example of someone who makes other people feel valued. When he encountered Jesus and his family, he left them with a blessing.

Anna, too, blessed the young family. Through her prayerful attentiveness, Anna reminds us that we ought to be ready to serve at all times. I like the old saying, "Do not limit the form in which you wish to serve God—be what the moment calls for. Be like a vessel into which anything can be poured—wine, milk, or water."⁴

Who knows what God will need us for today? He might need you to offer a word of encouragement to someone. God might ask you to comfort the broken heart of a friend. You might be called upon to pray for someone in distress. You might be asked for something as small as a cup of sugar or for something as great as a refuge from the storms of life. Who knows what God will need for someone? Who knows what God will need for us? I pray the willing vessel will be available.

⁴Chasidic saying attributed to the Apter Rebbe, in Stern, 203.

What do we do now that Jesus has come? We need to be at home. We need to go about our lives as we always do with the difference that Christ has come and made all the difference in what we do. We need to live in such a way as to be joyful and content where we are. David Grayson said,

“Joy in life seems to arise from a sense of being where one belongs . . . of being four-square with the life we have chosen. All the discontented people I know are trying [zealously] to be something they are not, to do something they cannot do

Contentment, and indeed usefulness, comes as the infallible result of great acceptances, great humilities—of not trying to make ourselves this or that . . . but of surrendering ourselves to the fullness of life—of letting life flow through us.”⁵

“When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.”

After Jesus had come, Mary and Joseph went home and let life begin to flow. What do we do now? We go home . . . and we live! Amen!

⁵David Grayson, as cited in Stern, 205-206.

January 13, 2019

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

In these moments of worship, O Lord our God, we come seeking respite for our weary souls and a refuge from the storms of life. Quiet our frantic pace and open our hearts to the movement of your Spirit among us. You have called us to be your people and we have known your constant presence and abiding love throughout all of life, yet we continue to be surprised by the abundance of your blessings and the fullness of your grace. Our only response to your mercy, O Lord, is to bow in gratitude and to offer our whole selves to you. Accept, we pray, our praise and thanksgiving which we now offer for all your goodness to us.

Even as we express our gratitude for your many blessings, O God, we realize that there is yet much work to be done in our world. Help us to be attentive to the needs of those around us and to work for reconciliation and peace. We pray for the tensions and divisions throughout our nation and for the needs of workers who are going unpaid. May we find a path to compromise and understanding and work to do what's best for all the people of this great nation. We pray for those who continue to suffer in the aftermath of devastating storms and fires. Grant them consolation as they mourn what they have lost and patience as they rebuild, and move us to respond to their suffering. We pray for those in our own city who have lost loved ones to violence this week. May we work tirelessly to bring hope and opportunity so that every part of our community knows dignity and prosperity. We pray for those whose bodies and minds are consumed with illness, with addiction, with desperation. Grant them the peace that only you can give. We pray for those who are hungry, for those who are lonely and hopeless, for those who live in poverty around the world. May the compassion we feel for them inspire us to become agents of justice and messengers of your salvation.

And on this day when we bring our praise and seek the direction of your Spirit, we are especially grateful for these, your children, who come to offer their gifts of leadership and service among us. We ask for your blessing upon them and your presence with them, to give them strength when the way is difficult and patience when the road is long, to share their joy when dreams come to life, and to grant them grace when they stumble. For this, your church, we also pray. May our hands be strong enough to do the work that is before us. May our hearts be tender enough to respond with love. Help us, O Lord, to see one another's gifts and to encourage one another in service. Bless us, O Lord, that we might live as a blessing to others. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, who lived among us as one who serves, and by the power of your Holy Spirit, we offer these and all our prayers. Amen.

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